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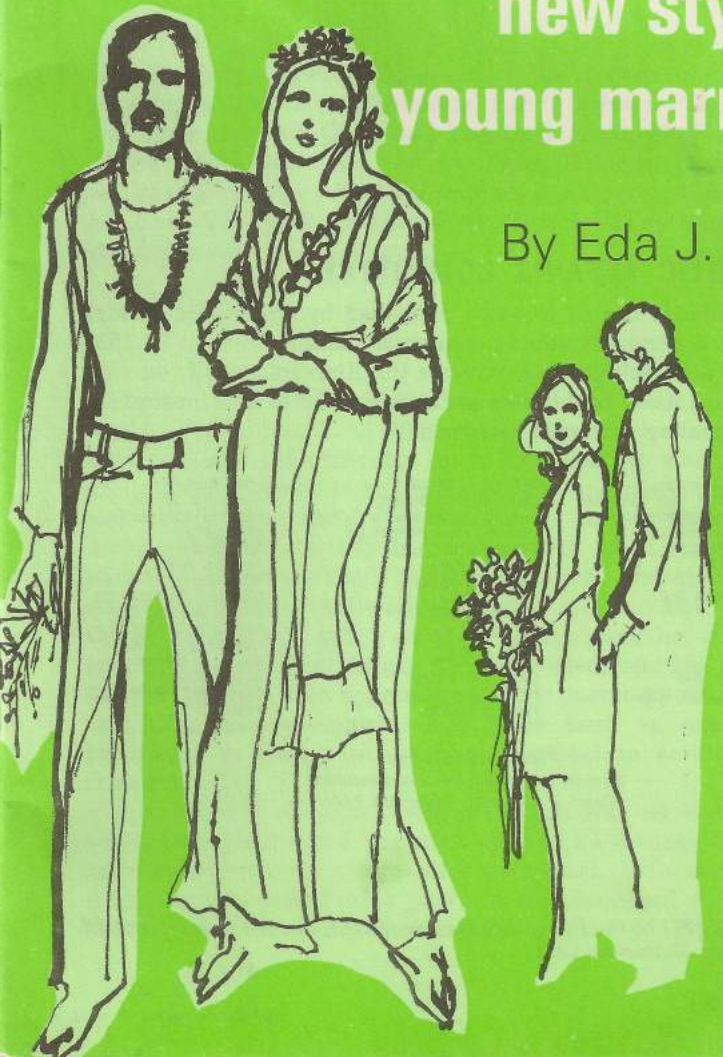
Mates and roommates: new styles in young marriages

By Eda J. LeShan



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Mates and roommates: new styles in young marriages

By Eda J. LeShan

Mrs. LeShan, a family life educator, has written many books for parents, as well as two previous Public Affairs Pamphlets, You and Your Adopted Child *and* The Only Child. *She is moderator of the television series* How Do Your Children Grow? *Some of the questions raised in this pamphlet are discussed more fully in her book* Sex and Your Teen-Ager *(David McKay Company). . . . Art by Anna Marie Magagna.*

CLAIRE AND ALEX MARTIN grinned at each other, with a slight air of triumph, as their guests began to leave. Judy's wedding had gone off without a hitch. The weather was perfect, the azaleas had bloomed in the nick of time, and the caterer had not walked out when she'd seen the size of their kitchen. By some lucky quirk of fate they had managed to avoid the frightening winds of change — their daughter was well and safely married. At 19, Judy was a well-paid secretary; she and Bob had met in the young people's group at their church; and he, at 22, had a good job and a bright future. No barefooted, bearded, and beaded boy friends had ever appeared on their doorstep, nor, even more terrifying to contemplate, had there been an out-of-wedlock pregnancy to deal with, as had happened to several of their friends.

For Annette and Larry Berger there was no such sense of well-being. Their son John, an A student all through high school, had dropped out of college after two years. He was living with Amy, his girl friend of a year, in an abandoned farmhouse in Maine which he and a friend had restored to livability. Now

John and Amy shared the house with another couple. Amy wove and sold small rugs, and John had become a locksmith. During their college years, it had seemed that Amy would become an art teacher and John a veterinarian, but now they said they "needed time to think, to find ourselves." They seemed completely devoted to each other — but what kind of life was this, for such bright, talented young people? And why, if they loved each other so much, wouldn't they get married? How long would the Bergers have to face embarrassing questions from friends and relations? What could they say to the shocked and angry grandparents, who made it quite clear that somewhere along the line the Bergers had failed to raise John properly?

Each year thousands of young people meet in the traditional ways, fall in love, become engaged, and, when they are self-supporting, marry with the happy approval of their families. Also, each year, thousands of other young people are experimenting with new life-styles. The traditional institutions, which for so long dictated the behavior of individuals, seem to have lost their former power and influence. The sexual freedom encouraged by more reliable methods of birth control, the relative affluence of a society no longer tied so firmly to mere economic survival, the genuine questioning and searching of the young for more meaningful life goals, an increasingly pluralistic society of varied and conflicting values — all these phenomena have caught parents, and their young adult children, in a whirlwind of change that can be confusing, even frightening.

For those of us, now "middle-aged," with children in their late teens and early twenties, it is alarming to see our children moving away from the patterns of courtship and marriage which we were taught were the basis for personal fulfillment and social stability. The roommate that Jenny brings home from college is the wrong sex, the wrong religion, even the wrong color. George, the quiet unrebellious middle child of a conservative middle-class family, who seemed well on his way to affluence as an architect, is building barns and tool sheds on a farm commune where he has had several short-lived love relationships. Sandy, at 24, shares an apartment with a young man she's been living with for three years. They both have interesting jobs, they seem very congenial, but they will not marry, no matter what financial or

affectional enticements both their families may offer. They just can't see any reason to marry when they don't plan to have children. Sandy's mother is mortified ("What can I say when people ask me if she's married?") as well as deeply disappointed ("Since she was a *baby*, I've been dreaming of her wedding!").

If parents find themselves uncertain and concerned, so do many of their children. We have swung full circle — from the rigid controls against which young people once bitterly chafed, to an atmosphere so permissive that many perfectly normal young people who are not emotionally ready for sexual encounters feel ashamed to admit it.

When social change is so rapid and society so complex, how can parents and young people find their way? Must the young go it alone because parents are too tied to the past to be of any help? How can young adults choose ways of living and loving that will be meaningful and satisfying?

There is no way to predict how a relationship will work out just by looking at the form it takes. In order to evaluate and make judgments about new or old forms of behavior, we need to understand the context in which they occur.

the form does not tell all

If we take a candid look at the traditional forms of marriage, we can see that while marriages were relatively stable and permanent, they were also frequently unhappy. When divorce was all but impossible because of economic and religious and social pressures, there were marriages in which people exploited each other, destroyed each other's lives, or just tolerated each other's existence. All of us know of marriages of quiet despair or open warfare; human misery is not something new in human experience. Now that divorce has become more acceptable and feasible, there are more than 10 million American families in which the husband or the wife has been married before.

Equally true and important, traditional marriages have also provided the most deeply satisfying love relationships, and to a still very considerable degree provide stability and security to the lives of growing children and to the community as well. But the mere fact of a "marriage" doesn't tell us whether it is good or bad, happy or miserable.

Nor is it possible to predict the outcome of a relationship that appears to have begun on a sound and realistic basis. Some months ago Judy and Bob, of that joyous garden wedding, appeared at a lawyer's office, seeking a divorce. They had been married two years. Judy, living away from parental supervision and expectations, found that she really had not been old enough for marriage at 19, and that she now greatly regretted not having gone to college. Bob found himself increasingly uneasy and dissatisfied with a wife who now seemed far more lively, flamboyant, and self-directed than the shy, virginal, helpless creature he thought he was marrying. The lawyer asked them if there wasn't some chance for working out their problems — what *really* went wrong? Judy answered thoughtfully, "I was too young, we were both too impatient — for sex, mostly, I guess. We should have lived together for a while first."

Predictions are just as difficult with today's young unmarried partners. John and Amy continued to live in Maine, but Amy went back to college, having decided that she *did* want to teach. John is more convinced than ever that doing things with his hands, growing his own food,

caring for his farm animals, is exactly what he wants to do. After three years of living together, they now plan to marry, because they would like to have a child when Amy finishes school.

Sandy and her boy friend have had a stormy and unhappy parting of the ways. She began to hope they would marry, he felt it should be possible for them to live together amicably even if he had occasional affairs with other women. The ending was painful, and Sandy feels very shaken, lonely, and frightened. Jenny has had several "roommates" since her first one, and it has just begun to dawn on her that she may have a problem with which she needs help. She has joined an encounter group, and feels now that her indecisiveness may have something to do with her very low self-esteem. George has chosen a wife, returned to "civilian life," and is involved in the architectural planning of different kinds of communes — no longer a dirty word, but a respectable alternative being tried by people of all ages and all walks of life.

Some of the most logical and solidly conceived relationships, surrounded by the most conventional trappings, can fall apart — or work out beautifully. The more unusual and off-beat arrangements can also succeed — or

fail. In order to evaluate any form of courtship and marriage, it is essential to look at the unique qualities of each relationship in the context of the times in which we live.

old and new life-styles and today's world

One young man has said: "I can't understand why so many people are so up tight about new kinds of love relationships. It seems to me that's about the best and most hopeful thing happening today!" He added, "I can't worry about the fact that a lot of people want to find new and better ways for human beings to live with each other in peace and love. What worries *me* are things like crowded, noisy, dirty cities; polluted water and air; businesses, governments — even apartment houses — that are so big, people feel lost and alone and without any control over their own destinies. Isn't it a *good* sign when people want to change something that isn't working very well anymore?"

Sociologists and psychologists point out that the nuclear family — a husband, a wife, and their children — is likely to have many more problems in today's world. Many families live in suburban communities, where they may eat and sleep but where the men do not work. And jobs require many families to move every few years. They meet the same kinds of people, do the same things — but never have a chance to establish roots anywhere. They must solve all their problems on their own, cut off from relatives and all childhood ties. They live in communities where everyone is very much the same; they have been caught on the treadmill of overconsumption and are always in debt. At the same time they feel bored and trapped. The industrial revolution has altered a major historical function of the family: to serve as an economic unit in which husband and wife, and as many children as they could have and keep alive, produced and manufactured the food, clothing, and shelter needed for survival.

The burden on marriage today is that its central purpose is affectional: to provide us with love, understanding, encouragement, compassion — the most difficult of all expectations. We find ourselves the victims of the dream of our parents and grandparents, who helped make it possible for us to have time to live and to think, in addition to keeping ourselves alive. But affluence and freedom are only part of the story. (Of course, not every-

one is enjoying this "affluence and freedom." Most young blacks, Puerto Ricans, other minorities — and all the poor — are of necessity more concerned with problems of day-to-day survival. The preoccupation with changing life-styles is a primarily middle-class, especially white middle-class, phenomenon.)

The gradual awakening to how the human race has plundered its planet has surely changed our attitudes toward bringing children into this world. There is, we know, a real and present danger that we may, if we don't find alternatives to war, finish off the human race. There is, in addition, a growing awareness of the greed, the hypocrisy, the self-interest — the inhumanity — which lie behind some of our most pious institutional values. The Pill has forever changed the roles of men and women in their sexual relationships. And modern technology has so changed the activities of homemaking that we simply cannot conceive of the role of women as tied exclusively to that area of life.

The growing experimentation with new life-styles is not the only result of these and other profound social changes. Even those who find that traditional patterns of courtship and marriage satisfy their needs are seeking ways to make their love relationships more significant.

the myth of perfect love

A woman of 40 says, "When I was growing up, people never aired their problems in public. I really grew up believing in the myth of perfect love. . . . 'And they lived happily ever after.' I remember how shocked I was, in college, when a professor told us that 'marriage guarantees nothing but experience.' In spite of all the very real problems I've faced as a wife and a mother, I really never gave up my fairy-tale illusions — and I think they were an unnecessary burden."

In contrast, many young people — and many older people, too — have begun to look harder at both the problems and the possibilities in marriage and family living. In a term paper on marriage, one college student wrote:

> I think my generation has a pretty cynical attitude. . . . At the same time that our parents were telling us about love and honor and responsibility, we saw our own parents as well as the other families around us fighting, hating, hurting each other. No kid with two

eyes or two ears could possibly avoid knowing how many adults were fooling around, living together for the children's sake, deceiving each other, living in despair. . . . I still think that marriage can offer great fulfillment, but only if people learn to really communicate with each other very openly, and are honest about their feelings and their problems. . . .

If too many young people seem to us to have a cynical view of marriage, it is important to remember that many of them are the children of divorce. As husbands and wives have demanded more from marriage, have sought their own personal fulfillment, they have also made it seem to their children that marriage leaves much to be desired.

It may be that what we have seen is a swing from one extreme to the other; from a time in which people kept their marital problems too well hidden to a time when perhaps our frankness has led our children to a far too jaundiced view of marriage. It may well be that in our attempts to be more open about problems, we have obscured the joys and satisfactions that have also been a part of even the most stormy of marriages. As one father said, "The trouble was that my kids saw us *fight* a lot, but they weren't around when we were making up!"

traditional patterns of courtship . . .

A group of middle-aged parents were reminiscing about their "dating days," sharing the common memories evoked by stories of first dates, blind dates, bringing a girl the first corsage, the nightmare of wallflowerdom at a dance. Suddenly one father exclaimed, "Say, you know why we're so nostalgic? It's because *nobody seems to date anymore!*" The group agreed that they rarely see young people dating in the ways that were familiar to them. One mother commented ruefully, "We all lived at home until we got married; now they all have their own pads — and if a daughter or son is bringing home 'someone special,' you figure they are probably already living together."

The forms may change, but the purposes remain the same. Whether a young couple go off to a movie on a Saturday night and have sodas afterward (the boy paying, of course!) or take off for a hosteling trip across France for the summer (all financial resources shared, of course!), there is the same business at

hand: finding out who you are through a relationship with someone else.

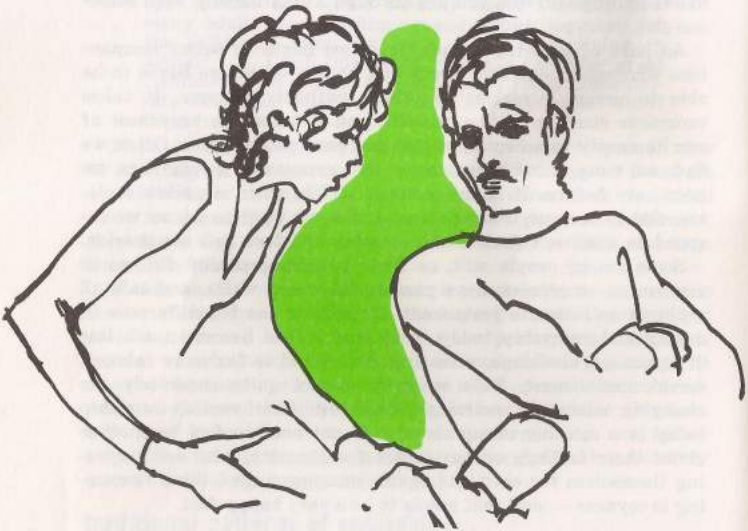
As part of growing to adulthood we begin to select companions who reflect our own needs and hopes — and we begin to be able to reveal ourselves to others without pretense. It takes enormous courage to "be oneself" and it takes the very best of our humanity to accept that gift and cherish the giver. Often we find out more about ourselves in this process of giving than we ever have before. It is the moment in life when we allow someone else to see our inner dream of who we want to be, as we respond to another's dream with respect and love and compassion.

Some young people still, as their parents probably did, go to movies, go on picnics, have parties, take long walks, and talk all night in an intimate restaurant. If there is one big difference in dating and courtship today, it is that it has become much less of a game, a challenge, a teasing ritual, and is far more relaxed, direct, and honest. This seems to reflect quite accurately the changing nature of marriage itself. In other words, courtship today is a meeting of equals who do not need to fool each other about their feelings or barter sex for security, who are preparing themselves for open and egalitarian marriages. What is missing is coyness — and that seems to be a very happy fact.

. . . and marriage

"The best thing about falling in love and getting married," says a happy young wife, "is that there can be a special kind of intimacy between two people that just can't happen any other way; you're completely committed to caring for another person, and you can let another person see you as you really are, without being afraid; being loved for yourself makes you want to become so much for the other person, that it helps you to grow."

"The worst thing about getting married too young," says a young husband, "is that you feel trapped. You fall in love, you want each other so much — and then, about six months later, you wake up. You've got a wife to support, and a baby coming. And you begin to wonder if you are going to regret giving up graduate school, so you could fulfill your dream to be a high school math teacher instead of being stuck, maybe forever, as an accountant in a blouse factory."



"The trouble with getting married too young," says one wife, wiser now, "is that you only think about the candlelit dinners, never about washing the dishes or taking out the garbage."

Marriage involves such a high level of sensitivity, compassion, patience, self-denial, and understanding, that it boggles the mind to think that so many people do make it work. It is a more difficult relationship than it has ever been before, because it must be chosen and rechosen every day; it does not have to remain permanent. The greater economic and sexual freedom of both men and women has made marriage more unstable — and also more fulfilling when it is chosen freely.

With less time and energy devoted exclusively to the economic necessities of life, people have found themselves more and more concerned with their own fulfillment. Whether or not a marriage will succeed seems now to depend on whether or not each partner

has the capacity for communicating his feelings and needs effectively, as well as the ability to hear what his spouse is trying to communicate, and whether or not each can allow the other space for continual growth and change. All sorts of new questions may face a young couple marrying today:

... If we both want careers, which one will take precedence? If a wife is offered an exceptional job in another city, should the husband move and give up his?

... Could our marriage work out well even if our jobs were to separate us for periods of time?

... Is fidelity still essential — or is it outmoded? Is there really any reason, since we might be married for more than fifty years, to deny ourselves other relationships that might enhance our growing? But then, what about the special intimacy we have — will it be destroyed?

... Do we want the experience of parenthood, or could we be more fulfilled without it?

... Which one of us wants to do the cooking and shopping? Shall we share it? If we both have important jobs, how will we decide who stays home with a sick baby?

Despite such complex issues, despite the pervasive uncertainties about the durability of marriage, there is a better chance than ever before that two people who love each other can fulfill their own and each other's needs. We now have remarkable new insights into the meaning of behavior, the psychological needs and problems we all share. We are able to communicate more freely and honestly, we are able to tolerate our angers and our fears more courageously — and surmount them; and we have at our disposal a whole new array of professionals — psychiatrists, psychologists, marriage counselors — who can help us when we are troubled and stymied in our attempts to work things out. We are sometimes overwhelmed by what modern marriage demands of us. But we may also find wonder and delight in the realization that behind the turmoil lies a concern for greater humanity and fulfillment in our relations with each other.

On the practical side, there are specific issues to consider in relation to early marriages:

... For some young people a happy marriage can be the best source of inspiration for study and training and the selection of

a profession. People mature at very different rates, and in some cases a 17-year-old may be more mature than a 25-year-old. Some young couples are so congenial, so clearly focused on similar goals, that marriage is as right for them as breathing, *but* . . .

. . . Some young people are still much too tied to their parents, are not yet ready to accept the responsibilities of caring for a home, are so unsettled in their own development that they may well be quite different people and have totally different goals in five years. If they are married and raising a family, they have cut their options for fulfilling these new goals, *but* . . .

. . . There are many young men and women who take as naturally to marriage and parenthood as the proverbial ducks to water. They love domesticity, they are relaxed and have all the energy they need for life with children, they are casual in their dress, they travel easily, without fuss, even with infants — and they expect to have many years, later on when their children are grown and they themselves are still young, for developing their own special interests or talents, *but* . . .

. . . When young people marry to legalize their sex relations, or to legitimatize an already conceived child, there is a strong chance of later resentment and bitterness. When they marry as a way of rebelling against parental authority or to escape unsolved frustrations or problems in school, there is little chance for the marriage to survive. It has been reported that divorce is at least three times more likely for couples who are 21 or under, and who have married under pressure. The depth of this problem is indicated by studies which suggest that anywhere from 30 to 80 per cent of high-school-aged brides are already pregnant, *but* . . .

. . . Given reasonable maturity and good sense, some couples who married early insist it was the best thing that ever happened to them.

Obviously there are no useful generalities. Each case is special and unique — but it is possible to evaluate each situation in the light of some of these overall dangers and virtues.

alternate life-styles

As we have suggested, there are many sound reasons behind the search for alternate life-styles. But it does not follow that all this experimentation will be wise or helpful. Every generation has had

its share of misfits, of the emotionally wounded, of those who for one reason or another are too vulnerable, too fragile, to move from childhood to adulthood without great pain and difficulty. One is likely to see this relatively small group in much sharper outline during a period of social upheaval. Rather than quietly spending their days in the farmhouse attic, unseen by neighbors, they are very much in evidence on the streets of Haight-Ashbury or the East Village. In discussing new approaches to courtship and marriage, we are not speaking of the behavior or the needs of this group.

Most of the young persons, earnest about life and love, who are searching for new life-styles are involved in what might be viewed as trial marriages. Indeed, their number is now so great, their experiment so much part of the fabric of American life today, that several social scientists have suggested we formalize these relationships in some way. One proposal is that persons choosing to live together could commit themselves to a two- or five-year "contract," renewable or not as they wish. A legal and permanent marriage could then take place when the couple are quite certain of their intentions and want to have children.

what about communal living?

To a somewhat lesser degree — but very much a vigorous avenue of exploration — young people have shown their interest in various forms of communal living. For many parents, the notion of unmarried young people living together as a couple causes less anxiety than the thought of their children moving into a commune. This is due partly to some sensational reports about this particular new life-style, and partly to unfamiliarity with it.

Psychologist Herbert Otto, who studied 30 communes, found that various forms of communal living are mushrooming all over the country, and attract people of all ages. The large majority are serious and purposeful — in no sense is it a fad or an escape from life; quite the contrary — and when they struggle, or perhaps even fail, it is because they are wrestling with the same complicated human problems that exist in the more traditional kinds of relationships.

The development of communes is a direct response to the social stresses of our times. Many communes are built around a serious

concern with ecology — with the preservation of natural resources. Members express a personal reverence for nature, a wish to eat organically grown foods, and to restore and rehabilitate land that has been abused. They are greatly concerned with the fact that 70 per cent of the population now lives on 1 per cent of the land, and that the overcrowding, the noise, the pollution, are bad for both adults and children — that urban living has become increasingly dehumanizing.

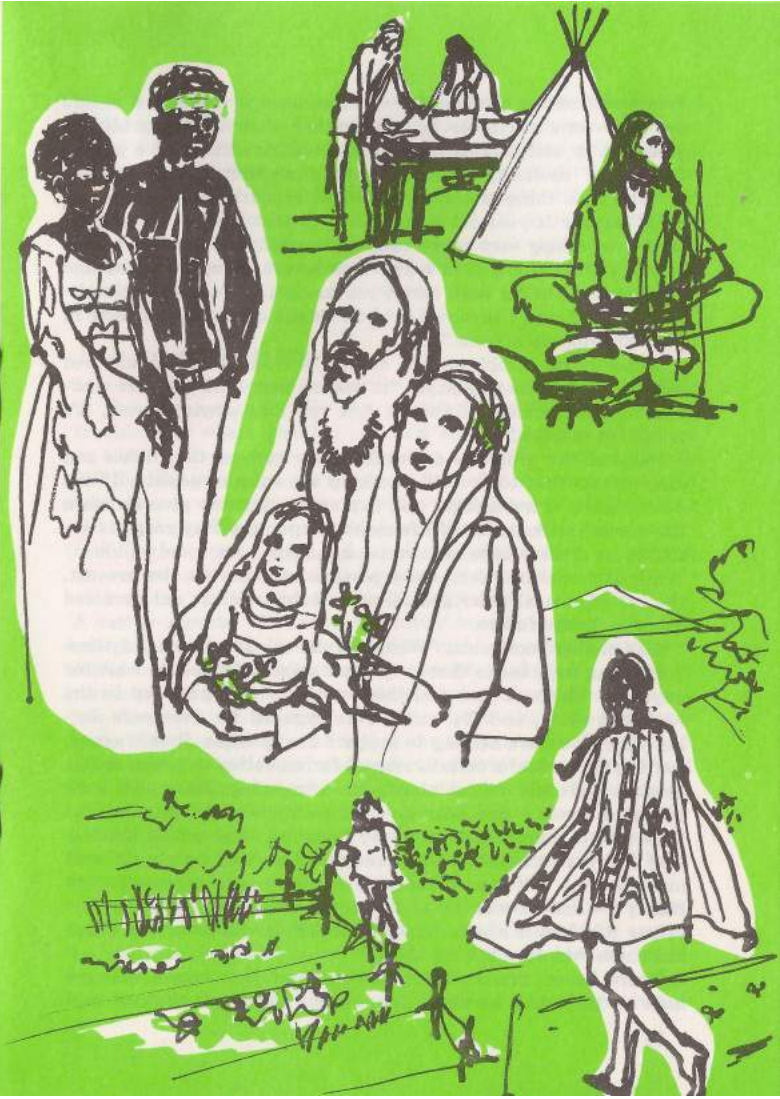
The growth of communes also reflects a personal search for new meaning in life, new spiritual values. It represents a search for ways in which people can grow independently as well as live more compassionately with each other. There is a strong anti-materialistic theme in most communes.

While there may be greater sexual permissiveness in many communes, there is also a very strong tendency in some of them for the development of clear and continuing commitments between couples. Nudism is more common, but frequently it seems to be related to openness about the human body and an affirmation of sensuality as a joyous part of the human experience. Group sex is rare; there is some experimentation in this area but probably no more than among married couples. A very small percentage of communes are experimenting with group marriage — but reports have highlighted this out of all proportion. Where it does exist, it is usually an attempt at working out new and responsible human relationships.

Of course, some individuals attempt communal living in an unrealistic search for an easy way of life without responsibility. Some are preoccupied with drugs. Such attempts to escape from reality never work and are probably no more common among commune members than among many other groups of individuals.

the problems of living together

There is little question but that the emergence of alternate forms of marriage represents in most cases a serious and responsible search for new ways of meeting the special demands and difficulties of our times. However, it seems equally clear that there are basic human needs and failings that are likely to cause the same kinds of difficulties experienced by the newly married. While the goals of the new life-styles may be relationships in which



love and freedom can co-exist — relationships that stand or fall on their own merits or failures rather than on the arbitrary rules set by institutions — the relationships still involve human beings and inevitably face many of the same human problems.

"The best thing about living together without getting married," says a 21-year-old college girl, "is that you both know you still have a long way to go to find yourself, and you know that if you change a lot, if in a few months or a few years you find you're not right for each other, you haven't made a final commitment. You haven't involved a whole bunch of innocent babies in your growing-up process."

Some of the problems are exactly the same as for married couples. As one mother says, "It doesn't matter if they are married or not married; if they're just two kids playing house, it's not going to work."

Some of the problems are different — such as the slights and discomforts that come with breaking the rules of society. If the commitment is not a legal one, it may be easier to give up when the normal vicissitudes of life make the going pretty rough. (Actually, as divorce laws ease, this argument loses some validity.) While it is natural for young persons to focus on the present, the act of formal marriage seems to bring with it an increased concern for the future.

One mother comments, "What worries me about some of these kids living together is that they don't seem to be able to wait for anything. Maybe I just feel this way because I grew up in the *real* Depression, and Mel and I were engaged for five years during which we were helping to support our families. It was agony, but I think we had a certain respect for ourselves — pride, really, because we could forget about our own unhappiness and work toward a goal. I can hear how old-fashioned that sounds. But with that background, it was very hard for us to accept the fact that Bill just couldn't see any reason at all why he should wait until he was self-supporting before taking an apartment with Nancy — and he was 17 at the time! When he asked why, his father told him it had to do with developing character; he didn't know what we were talking about!"

There is, on the whole, more likelihood that people will get hurt — that with so much free choice, some will abuse it and

exploit others. In a society that still offers more prestige and economic security to the married woman, more young women than young men may have doubts, even anxieties, about such a partnership of "equals." One unhappy mother said, "It's fine for the boy. If they separate when *he's* 30, nobody will care — but Celia will be 30 too, and that's terrible!" Of course, exactly the same thing now occurs when marriages break up early. But the position of the single woman has changed for the better, and will surely continue to improve as women seek educational and professional equality with men.

immaturity or idealism?

If a marriage takes place in order to legalize sex, it's in trouble; if living together is for sex without strings, it is also in trouble. But where genuine affection and responsible caring are as basic to the unmarried relationship as to the married, it may well be that young people can grow toward permanent emotional commitment through experimenting with one or several trial relationships. There are, indeed, relationships of great tenderness, joyful domesticity, and continuing maturation — as well as promiscuous, superficial, and eventually destructive ones.

Much the same range of possibilities exists in communal life. A father reports, "We were absolutely horrified when Jean left college and went to live in an agricultural commune where they raised organic vegetables for those health food stores. We were sure she was going to sleep around and get pregnant, and get into drugs — all the stereotypes you read about in the headlines. What really happened is that she met some wonderful, kind people who really listened and understood why she'd hated school so much, and they helped her figure out what she wanted to do with her life. She's left there now — she met a young man who worked in the local town and they've got their own place now. But when we visit her I go to the commune myself to say hello to those people. They make me feel good!"

A mother told us, "I have eight grandchildren, in three colors, and I got them all in the past three years!" Her son is among the traditionally married, but he and his wife decided to join a commune for a very special reason. They have joined together with six other married couples, all of whom had always hoped

to have large families but now feel they should have only two children because of their concern with overpopulation. Each couple plan to have their quota. But by joining forces, on a rambling old estate where they each have private quarters, they can enjoy the pleasures of a household that will ultimately have 14 children. The children are cared for on a communal basis, releasing several of the mothers to work full-time.

Entering into a relationship without marriage or joining a commune can represent immaturity, impulsiveness, rebellion against parents, or escape from oneself and one's problems. It can also represent a genuine concern for others and a deep idealism; it can involve a truly loving alliance offering excellent opportunities for mutual growth. Parents can play a significant role in influencing which way the relationship goes.

the role of parents

It is natural for parents to be concerned. The freedom to choose one's life-style is a heavy responsibility. With so many choices available, what can we do to help our young people discover their own road to a gratifying life?

For parents it starts long before their children are ready to choose their love relationships. The preparation for courtship and marriage — whatever its forms — must begin earlier and go deeper. To make so many critical decisions for themselves, our children need as much information as we can give them — and the emotional maturity, the discipline, to do their own choosing. It means that we must provide more opportunities both at home and at school to discuss the issues of human relationships.

We also need to rethink the whole question of discipline and freedom in child-raising. If we want our children to make healthy and constructive decisions about their adult lives, we must provide opportunities for them to flex their muscles, to make mistakes in judgment and learn from them; we must give them permission to discover who they are and what the consequences of their choices will be.

No one grows up without making serious mistakes; the truth of the matter may well be that most learning and growing result, not from immediate, easy successes, but from overcoming failures. We need to provide the opportunities for struggle — and we

also need to grow enough ourselves to live with the uncertainty and the pain that this struggle engenders.

There is general agreement among family life experts that sexual experimentation and out-of-wedlock pregnancies among teenagers are almost never the result of too much information. Far more typically, these are children who rarely or never felt free to talk to adults about sexual matters. The dean of a large women's college reported, "In my experience with unmarried pregnant students, the large majority have never had one good, solid course on sexual development, and have never been able to talk to their parents about the awesome experiences of sexual maturation."

If we are confronted by their poor decisions or behavior they regret, we need to recognize that growing to maturity is always painful and difficult and few things that happen are irrevocable. There will surely be some serious problems. But what matters most is what we do about them.

It is perfectly natural for parents to care — and therefore to worry. But such concern can be useless or helpful, depending on how it is expressed. Alice Freed, a divorcée, is so afraid that "Marcy will get hurt," that every time Marcy goes out on a date or seems attracted to a new young man, she gets the same long lecture about how boys take advantage of girls, and why she should wait until she's married. Each time the lecture ends with, "Just remember, no man will buy the cow if he can get the milk free." Marcy is so sickened by this cheapening of her value as a human being, so appalled at this view of male-female relations, that it would never occur to her to talk to her mother about some of the problems of loving that she must deal with.

Dick Hart, on the other hand, prides himself on being a "with-it father," right in step with the modern world. When his daughter Julie wrote that she was bringing her college boy friend to the Harts' summer cottage, Dick insisted that the guest bedroom be readied for both of them, despite his wife's reluctance; and when they arrived he carried both their bags into the room. Neither of the young people said a word, but when she got back to college Julie wrote home, "Dad — *never* do that again. Dave and I were too embarrassed to say anything — but we are just good friends at this point. We are *not* having sex relations."

At the other extreme, some parents have been responsible for doomed marriages. Their deep-seated attitudes, derived from a different time and different personal and social needs, made them so nervous about premarital sexual activity, or so frantic to legitimatize a pregnancy, that they forced a marriage — despite clear evidence that it would not be founded on the kind of maturity and love marriage needs.

If we wish to be genuinely helpful to our young people, we need to *listen*. That is far more important than giving the standard lecture that itemizes all our fears, or behaving in ways calculated to please young people — as if we were in a popularity contest. Parents who learn to really listen to the ideas, the anxieties, the plans, of their almost-adult children soon realize how deeply concerned and responsibly thoughtful their children are. These parents also find that they are soon permitted to become partners to their children's growing; that they are consulted and heard with respect. And there is undoubted value in such a partnership of communication. The middle-aged tend to view all change with a jaundiced eye; the young tend to relinquish tradition much too lightly. We worry too much about the future, they live too much only in the present.

Most of us have learned some useful things about living which a 20-year-old may not yet know! If we have lived richly and allowed ourselves to experience both pain and joy, if we have welcomed new possibilities and tried to remain open to new ideas, then chances are we also have something useful to say. We tend to have a longer perspective. We are likely to be less impulsive, and to consider more sides of a question. And if we are truly grown-up we may also be pretty good judges of character.

when to "interfere"

It is very difficult for parents to make an honest assessment of when they can be most helpful by interfering quite openly and directly and when they should mind their own business and trust to their children's basic good sense. One father said, "I know kids have to make their own mistakes, but if I saw anybody really abuse my children, either by hurting them physically or by exploiting them in some way, I would step in, no matter what the consequences." Of course there *are* such extreme instances,

but they are rare. A more common kind of dilemma was expressed by the father who said, "We know that times have changed, and we really try to look at some of the prejudices we grew up with, and to overcome them. But how can you *not* worry if your child falls in love with someone of a different race or religion? Marriage is tough enough without any extra obstacles — and you worry about how other people will treat them. You also wonder if they would have fallen in love with each other if there hadn't been these differences — I mean, suppose it's just a form of rebellion, or a way of trying to show how tolerant they are compared with their parents?"

Often when parents bend over backwards not to interfere, they find their children accusing them of being indifferent. One mother said, "We were *very* uneasy about the girl Mark was going out with, but I kept telling myself I mustn't be an interfering, overprotective mother. She was a very strange girl, with strange ideas and peculiar mannerisms, but we kept our misgivings to ourselves. When she finally had a breakdown and had to go to a mental hospital, Mark blamed himself and was in torment. When we said we had expected something of this kind — that she had seemed to us to be a disturbed and unhappy person from the beginning, so that he could not possibly blame himself — he looked at us accusingly and said, 'How could you not tell me such a thing, when you could see how involved I was getting?' " Of course, Mark might not have accepted his parents' opinion, but with such strong misgivings shouldn't they have spoken up?

We all wonder what to say and how to say it when we see hazards in the relationships our children choose. By and large it seems to be the better part of wisdom to tread gently. Direct criticism almost always fails; it invites a defensive reaction. We often feel as if we are walking a tightrope. But if we can create a climate in which a young person is free to ask our opinion without feeling he will lose face or jeopardize a hard-won freedom, we will find the road to two-way communication far easier at crucial moments. Without sitting in judgment, we can raise alternatives and point out consequences. Even more important, we can let our children know that their mistakes are not fatal; they will learn from them, and we will be standing by to help.

If we are truly eager to remain in close touch with our young adult children, we should take a long hard look at some of our attitudes to see if they are valid, appropriate — and even moral. For example, we may put far too much importance on external appearance, and too little on getting to know a person before we judge him. If we are busy disapproving of long hair, bare feet, and torn jeans, we may fail to notice they belong to a person of great sensitivity and warmth. Not always, of course — any more than every short-haired, well-groomed young person is automatically responsible and trustworthy.

As one candid mother put it, "When Ginny finally got me to look at the *persons* instead of the labels, like 'Jew' or 'Chinese' or 'poor' or 'hippie' or 'Lutheran,' I found that we had much more in common than we had things that separated us."

We can help young people to look at their own motives and needs, and to try to look ahead. There are very real hazards in

teenage marriages as well as in teenage liaisons, and there is no reason why we shouldn't try to be helpful as long as we realize that we cannot force our children to do what we say. We can only try to be their loving companions in their own search for answers.

It may be necessary for parents to take the first step, by becoming good listeners. It is harder for a young person to talk to his parents because he cannot help feeling like a child again. It takes great courage and self-respect for a son or daughter to ask a parent, "What do you think?" or "Can I ask your opinion?"

Parents must make a valiant effort to keep in touch, to keep an open mind, not to be judgmental; to participate without needing to be in charge. But it is not a one-way street. We need to make it clear that we can only go so far ourselves — we need to be met part of the way by the younger generation. They must try to see us with the new eyes of their emerging adulthood, and not put us down just because we are older. As one 22-year-old mother said, with great candor, "I figured my mother was the dumbest, most narrow-minded woman I'd ever known — until *I* was grown up enough to really look at her as just another struggling human being with weaknesses and strengths — just like everybody else!"

If we are encouraging our young people to be honest with us, we have every right to be honest with them about our feelings; but there is a difference between expressing a point of view and giving a command!

It may well be that in order to be helpful, sometimes parents have to take a hard line on early marriage as well as on other kinds of arrangements. One father said, "We really had the feeling that Ted and Rosie were made for each other, and they'd do OK, but we felt we shouldn't make it too easy for them. . . . We raised every objection we could think of, we really made them struggle against our opposition — and when they *did* marry, we knew that they had certainly been forced to think it through very carefully."

If we are true to our function as slower-downers, parental responsibility may sometimes lead us to behave in unexpected ways. An aunt says, "Life is full of surprises! My niece of 18 fell in love with one of her professors who was 30. They had gone to-

gether for a year, and they really seemed right for each other. But my sister and her husband were very upset about the age difference, and how Leslie was so young to make this decision. So, in what seemed like a switch of generational roles, *they* suggested that maybe it would be a good idea for Leslie and Sam to live together for a while first! Leslie and Sam found the suggestion pointless, and insisted on a formal engagement and a beautiful, big wedding. They've been married a year, and so far it looks as if they knew what they were doing."

In another situation, Carol called her parents and said she wanted to move out of the college dormitory and live with her boy friend. "You have to pay for my room and board now," she said. "What difference will it make if you just give me the same amount of money for our sharing an apartment?" Her parents felt it made a *big* difference, and refused; if Carol moved out, she'd have to find the means to pay her own way. A week later Carol wrote that she had decided to stay where she was. Her mother said, "We figured it was our duty as parents not to make it so easy, so she'd really have to think about it and make some mature sacrifices if she wanted to change her way of life. I suppose that if she had come back to us and said she was prepared to work part time and go to school part time in order to live with Ken, we would have come around and helped out. But she wasn't ready, or nothing we said could have stopped her."

It may well be the role of older people to play the devil's advocate at first. But it is equally important, when young people give us every evidence that they are in love, that we show our respect and our confidence in them, and make it quite clear we are always available if they need us.

When Joanne and Donald decided to live together at college, in their own apartment, Joanne's grandmother was hysterical. She told Joanne and her parents that she would never speak to Joanne again, that she was so ashamed she would just tell people she didn't have a granddaughter any more. A year later Joanne and Don made a surprise visit to Grandma's home. Because they were such loving, caring, decent kids, Grandma found herself in utter confusion. How could such lovely people be so awful? In a letter to her daughter and son-in-law after this visit she wrote, "You don't really deserve it, but Joanne has turned out very

well; and it's all due to Donald." Several months later she casually mentioned that she was moving to a smaller apartment — would Joanne and Donald like to have some of her china, silverware, and furniture?

Parents and grandparents, as well as other friends and relations among the older generation, may well be alarmed by some of the new ways that seem to them to be strange and dangerous. But when they have said what they have to say, and the evidence of their own eyes tells them something good is happening, it would be a shame to deny themselves or the young people the genuine pleasure of each other's company and respect.

giving constructive guidance

In helping young people assess their plans for marriage at a very early age, it is usually wiser if parents do not concentrate their arguments on the ages of the young people involved. After all, levels of maturity cannot be gauged by age alone — and nothing raises the defenses of the young against listening and thinking like being *told* they are young! If we want to be constructive in our guidance, it makes much more sense to discuss the issues: The teens and early twenties are a time of rapid growth and change, a time for self-discovery; we really cannot be sure yet about who we are or what we want to do with our lives; these are the years for experimentation, for searching, for learning as much as we can about ourselves. And we need the freedom to change direction, to try different courses of study, different kinds of work, even new kinds of relationships.

Another valid subject for discussion is the fact that most young people who want to train for a career are not financially independent until their middle twenties, at least. In order to have a fair chance for working out the normal strains of married life, a young couple need to have some degree of emotional detachment from parents. If they still rely on their families for support, such independence may be exceedingly difficult to come by. As one father said, "You aren't really making your own decisions when someone else is paying the bills."

In a teenage marriage where the couple may even have to live with parents and be entirely sustained by them, it is very hard not to just go on being the children in the household — children

who happen to share the same bed. It is reasonable and accurate to point out the hazards of such a beginning. On the other hand, when a young couple are really grown up and have made the necessary emotional separation from their parents, it may be sensible and realistic for their parents (if they can) to lend or give the necessary funds for the completion of professional training — so long as there are no strings attached to the ways in which these funds are used. One grateful son explained it this way: "My parents approved of my becoming a doctor, but they heartily disapproved of our living in a camper on the outskirts of town, and spending some of the money they gave us for living expenses on a trip to Europe. But because I was doing my work and passing my courses, they understood that *we* had to decide on our own priorities. That way we felt that we were in charge of our own lives, despite still needing their help."

In essence, the most important role parents can play in helping their young people make wise decisions is in being available as good listeners, who do not prejudge. It is also important to avoid, as much as one can, the temptation to hand down ultimatums that we really don't want to carry out. "Never darken our doorstep again" leads to as much agony for parents as for their children. And if we feel that our misgivings are still well-founded, if we must stand by and watch a child make a mistake, at least we are *there* to help pick up the pieces at the appropriate moment. Nothing has interfered more with this kind of parental support than our tendency to drown in guilt; we wail, "What did we do wrong?" In focusing our attention and our energies on this meaningless and often totally inaccurate question, we become so absorbed with our own pain that we cannot help our child with his.

the future of loving

Sometimes we find ourselves so preoccupied with changing behavior that we lose sight of the profound upheaval in the values that underlie the actions.

A middle-aged lady of high principles sadly states, "The trouble is, nobody *believes* in anything anymore." Not quite true. The turmoil of our times is a clear indication that "belief" is not absent, but it is changing. These are not "immoral" times.

A minister comments, "The best thing that has happened to courtship and marriage is that sex is no longer a commodity to be bartered for; how immoral it has always been for women to trade their sexuality for security!"

In the midst of the chaos and confusion of social change, there is every evidence of the emergence of some very positive human goals and values:

- *Men and women should be equal partners in their search for love and personal fulfillment.*
- *With candor and honesty we must re-examine and reshape our social institutions so that they speak to the human needs of human beings.*
- *Life is sacred; every human being born into the world has unique qualities, and we need a climate of life in which these can thrive.*
- *The fullest growth of each person is irrevocably tied to his capacity for allowing, encouraging, enhancing, the growth of others.*
- *We must search for new and better ways of revealing our innermost selves to each other; to be human is to be beautiful, and there is no room for shame in our nakedness — physical or spiritual.*

In the context of these values, marriage is not obsolete — but it must change. In whatever forms it may appear, it would seem destined to speak ever more clearly to the fundamental human need for caring, for loving, for mutual trust and companionship.

One indication that older forms of morality are giving way to new is the fact that while many young people seem to be turning away from ritualized, institutional marriage ceremonies, they are still expressing a need for some form of sacrament, some social expression of their private commitment to each other. Many are writing their own marriage vows. Some, as one minister recounted, are pledging not only to be faithful to each other, but also to work together for peace, justice, and brotherhood. And no one who has been a witness to some of these ceremonies can deny that despite changes in dress and setting and music — or perhaps even because of these — they can express as deep a sense of idealism, hope, and love as ever before. Who can miss the big, formal wedding, while standing on the banks of a river, listening to a young couple speaking to each other about what they want to make of their lives together, as two friends softly play their guitars?

This is not to suggest, by any means, that more traditional religious forms of marriage are being given up. For many persons the religious rituals, hundreds or even thousands of years old, add social and spiritual dimensions to their personal commitment, which they value highly. But even within the most orthodox churches and temples, there have been dramatic changes in the past few years indicating the need for bringing old and new attitudes and behavior into a more congenial relationship.

A rabbi, conducting the marriage service for a couple who had lived together for two years, said, "Most people will speak to you of love and honor and self-sacrifice; I speak to you of only one thing — friendship. *Be each other's best friend.*"

A best friend is a person who loves you for yourself, wants you to become all you can be, and hopes you will never feel alone and unloved. If this be the marriage of the future — in whatever forms it may take — the future looks bright indeed.

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